



# By the Numbers:

## State Goals for Increasing Postsecondary Attainment

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### Executive Summary

Many states have begun to seek ways to drive improvements in higher education outcomes and productivity as a result of both budgetary constraints and the pressures of global competition. State policymakers—and the public—want to know what benefits their educational investment is yielding: Are more students earning postsecondary credentials that allow them to support themselves and their families and contribute to economic growth?

*By the Numbers* addresses one important state-level approach to assessing—and increasing—the value of public higher education: the setting and publicizing of clear, numerical goals for expanding student access and success. In 2005, Jobs for the Future conducted a 50-state survey of state higher education plans to determine how many states have set numerical targets for enrollment and completion and how these goals are set, measured, and publicized to institutions, the public, and policymakers. This study asks: When it comes to improving the outcomes of their public higher education systems, do states know where they are trying to go and have they a plan for how and when they will get there?

*By the Numbers* assesses whether and how fully each state's higher education strategy documents and plans embrace goal-setting as

an approach to improving college access and success. It also highlights efforts in two states, Texas and Kentucky, whose comprehensive strategies provide valuable lessons for other states.

During our research, which presents a snapshot of state goals and plans at a particular moment, we were impressed by how quickly the policy landscape is changing. Some of the data reported on here may already be out-of-date; however, we believe that the general picture, in terms of the extent to which states use goals, have rationales to justify their targets, measure progress, and publicize results is accurate and instructive. The goal is to help state policymakers think about how to proceed as they navigate this new terrain and try to set goals and develop accountability plans that drive significant change.

JFF's research assessed how states array themselves in relation to four distinct components of comprehensive state strategies for setting and monitoring progress toward higher education enrollment and completion goals.

### 1. Setting Goals: What States Have Numerical Goals? What Are the Most Common Goals?

Of the 50 state higher education plans JFF scanned, fewer than half specified measurable goals for increasing the proportion of their population with a postsecondary education, including specific benchmarks and a specific timeframe for achieving the goals. Fewer than half contain any numerical goals to increase higher education enrollment or success, whether for increasing enrollment in postsecondary education, improving the retention of postsecondary students, or increasing the number of postsecondary students who earn degrees.

Twenty states have set at least one goal for increasing total enrollments statewide, while ten have set a retention goal, and nineteen a graduation goal. Ten states have set goals for all three areas. Only a handful of states have established goals or targets that are disaggregated by race, income, or gender. Texas is perhaps the most impressive and elaborate of these.



*By the Numbers* was prepared for *Double the Numbers*, JFF's national initiative to advance public policies that can significantly increase the number of young people who make it to and through college. *Double the Numbers* is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Ford Foundation.

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2. Rationales: What Drives State Goals for Postsecondary Access and Success?

While some states have set explicit numerical goals to improve higher education outcomes, few provide explicit rationales in publicly available documents for how they arrived at these targets. While many states cite the general importance of strengthening economic competitiveness, the links between particular enrollment or graduation goals and economic development or other outcomes are typically left unexplained.

Eleven states provide a clear rationale for their numerical goal around enrollment increases, some of which benchmark against other states and some against the performance of different population subgroups within the state. The most common rationale for statewide goals is meeting or exceeding the national average for the number of students enrolled and graduating from higher education.

3. Measuring Progress: How Do States Track and Report Progress?

If a state sets measurable goals for improved outcomes, it should also create a quick, easy way for the public to judge how well the state as a whole—and individual institutions—are progressing toward meeting those targets. JFF found 15 states with some form of performance monitoring mechanisms, including report cards, annual reports, and accountability systems. There is significant room for improving the alignment of data and reporting systems that are part of state higher education accountability systems and for making it easier to access and understand reporting on statewide enrollment, retention and/or completion goals as specified in higher education plans.

4. Public Outreach: How Are States Publicizing their Goals and Plans?

In an environment where many different priorities compete for public and policymaker attention, strategies that use measurable goals as a way to drive improvement in particular directions typi-

cally require some form of campaign to publicize the goals as a priority and to build public demand for success.

A number of states are creatively positioning and publicizing their targets and improvement plans. State public campaigns appear to cluster in two groupings: campaigns that frame the need for increasing the population’s college skills and credentials as a “*public agenda*” for higher education; and consumer-focused campaigns that stimulate the demand for higher education through motivational *public awareness and media campaigns*.

Six of the states that have set numerical goals for student enrollment or success have launched explicit public campaigns to build support and momentum for their efforts. Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Texas have developed the most comprehensive public awareness strategies, each designed to assist the state in reaching the goals specified in their higher education plans.

Recommendations

*By the Numbers* concludes with recommendations to states on how to design and implement goal-setting efforts so they have a greater chance of success.

- Set a small number of realistic, but ambitious, goals—and then create a concise action plan delineating roles, responsibilities, and a timeline.
- Disaggregate goals by population subgroups to emphasize the importance of progress that is equitable.
- Relate goals logically and clearly to the problems the state wants to address.
- Inform the public of the status of statewide higher education goals, instead of reporting solely on goals set for individual institutions.
- Use public agenda and awareness campaigns to build and sustain both public and political will and to reach out to populations that are traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

Summary Table: Statewide Numerical Goals for Higher Education		
Statewide Numerical Goals	Number of States	States
ENROLLMENT States with at least one participation goal	20	AK, CO, FL, GA, IN, KY, LA, ME, MI, MO, NJ, NV, OR, PA, TN, TX, UT, VA, WV, WY
RETENTION States with at least one retention goal	10	AK, LA, MO, NJ, OR, PA, TX, TN, VA, WY
GRADUATION States with at least one graduation goal	19	AK, FL, GA, KY, LA, MI, MO, NC, NJ, NV, OK, OR, PA, TX, TN, VA, WA, WY, WV
ALL THREE GOALS States with enrollment, retention, and graduation goals	10	AK, LA, MO, NJ, OR, PA, TX, TN, VA, WY